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THE POLYTHEISM OF GEN., CHAP. I

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Describing the character of the record of the Creation contained in the first chapter of Genesis, Professor Bennett tells us that it is "the last of many editions of an ancient Semitic story, its priestly writer having purged it of its polytheistic superstition and made it a noble and simple declaration of the making of all things by God, who is one, holy, and benevolent."¹ In like manner Professor Zimmern refers to "the strictly monotheistic tone . . . that pervades the whole chapter";² while Professor Sayce alludes to its "devout" and "uncompromising monotheism."³ Finally Hommel, referring especially to the first eleven chapters of Genesis, asserts that "the Bible exhibits nothing but the purest monotheism."⁴

That in contrast to "the exuberant and grotesque polytheism" of the Babylonian cosmogony, the Book of Genesis may be said to open with "a sublime and dignified narrative"⁵ is undoubtedly true, and from this standpoint we are prepared to accept Professor Bennett's view of Gen., chap. I; but whether we have here a narrative written from the position of an uncompromising monotheism, as all these writers contend, is a doubtful matter, and, as we are about to show, one which is made even more so by the further statements of these same writers.

Professor Sayce thinks that the "us" in Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7, refers to a polytheistic document which lay before the Hebrew writer;⁶ while in his earlier work he had referred to this "us" as constituting one of the traces of a persistent polytheism among the bulk of the people which were left upon "the language and

¹ *Genesis*, 35.

² *Babylonian and Hebrew Tradition*, 7.

³ *Higher Criticism*, 71.

⁴ *Ancient Hebrew Tradition*, 308.

⁵ Driver, 2, 30.

⁶ *Expository Times*, VII, No. 7.

possibly the thoughts of the enlightened few.”⁷ Professor Zimmern sees here a reference to the conception of other divine beings which was a relic of the early polytheistic foundation of the Hebrew story.⁸ Professor Bennett thinks that the meaning of this “us” is definitely determined by Isa. 6:1, 2, where Yahweh is described as surrounded by his heavenly court.⁹ Professor Davidson acknowledges that “the language is obscure,” although he gives the explanation of Professor Bennett as that “of most expositors.”¹⁰ Professor Driver, however, rejects this on the ground that “it would make the angels take part in the creation of man, which is not probable,”¹¹ and he therefore, with MacLean, sees here “a plural of majesty.”¹² But, as Professor Wade points out, this interpretation “will not explain Gen. 3:22,”¹³ which indeed is practically conceded by Driver himself, who explains the phrase here “as one of us” as indicating that man “has become like one of the class of divine beings to which Jehovah also belongs.” Indeed, as he further admits, it is to this class of beings that the serpent refers in Gen. 3:5, where the phrase “as God” signifies, and should be so rendered, “as gods” (RVM), thus harmonizing with the phrase “sons of God” in Gen. 6:2, which should there also be rendered “sons of gods.” Professor Driver unreservedly admits that in Gen. 6:1-4 we have “an ancient Hebrew legend a piece of ‘unassimilated mythology,’” adding, “as a rule the Hebrew narrators stripped off the mythological coloring of the pieces of folklore which they record, but in the present instance it is still discernible.”¹⁴ Now if we have here a piece of *pure mythology*, similar to the classical myths which record the marriages between the gods and mortals,¹⁵ in other words, a polytheistic narrative, we are fully justified in seeing in Gen. 1:26 an allusion to a polytheistic conception of deity. In fact, when compared with

⁷ *Higher Criticism*, 84, 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 37.

¹⁰ *Theology of the Old Testament*, 129.

⁹ *Genesis*, 85.

¹¹ *Genesis*, 14.

¹² *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “God.”

¹³ *The Book of Genesis*, 210.

¹⁴ *Genesis*, 45, 50, 82, 83; cf. Charles, *Enoch*, 62 n; Davidson, *Job*, 6.

¹⁵ Professor Bennett, *ibid.*, 133.

Gen. 3:5, 22, this is the only possible conclusion. So examined, with all the associated facts considered, Gen., chap. 1, is seen to be a narrative not of a devout monotheist, jealous for the recognition of the essential oneness of deity, but of a *henotheist* not yet fully evolved from the polytheistic thought underlying such a belief. Thus in the "us" of Gen., Chaps. 1-11, we have a definite reference to divine beings upon whom the title gods, or sons of gods, is unreservedly bestowed, a more correct term than that of "angels" given them in II Pet. 2:4, and Jude, vs. 6. Notwithstanding therefore the assertion of many scholars that Gen., chap. 1, was written at a very late period by a Hebrew scribe anxiously striving from the standpoint of a strict and devout monotheist to bestow a thorough and exhaustive treatment on all aspects of his subject,¹⁶ the evidence we have even so far produced shows that such an opinion is absolutely without warrant. And here we are supported by the last scholar who has written on this subject. Professor Toffteen, referring to the phrase in Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man in our image," describes it as plainly polytheistic "implying a recognition of more than one God." "Gen., chap. 1," he adds, "uses Elohim in a polytheistic sense." Finally he concludes touching the date of the document "P," which includes the first and much of the rest of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, that it belongs to "a very early date, most probably to about the time of Samuel, Saul, and David."¹⁷ Owing therefore to the polytheistic thought so plainly exhibited in Gen., chap. 1, this chapter *must* have been written before a pure monotheism was first taught in Israel, that is, before the eighth century at least, which brings us now to consider the polytheism of the Hebrew-Israelites and their fathers.

It has been claimed that the Hebrews never were polytheists.¹⁸ In the issue of this journal for May, 1899, I undertook to show that this was a mistake. Recently, however, this claim has been repeated on the ground that the worship by Israel's fathers of the gods of Babylon and Egypt shows merely that they abandoned

¹⁶ Zimmern, *op. cit.*, 7; Driver, *op. cit.*, xv; Ryle, *Early Chap. Gen.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Historical Exodus*, 22, 23, 44.

¹⁸ Watson, *Christianity and Idealism*.

themselves to the worship of the foreign gods in whose country they sojourned, and not that they themselves had possessed their *own* special deities. The tendency to a persistent idolatry among the Israelites is freely acknowledged, but this, it is claimed, "cannot be counted as among the relics of a once prevalent Israelitish polytheism."¹⁹ Thus MacLean, relying upon Kautzsch, does not hesitate to say that there is "no trace of Hebrew polytheism."²⁰ To us, however, it seems that there is not only a very clear trace of an original and continuous Hebrew polytheism, but that the very plain evidence of this is lost sight of by those scholars who deny it because of their failure to take into consideration the origin and development of that part of the Hebrew people who only later became known as the nation of Israel. Jacob went down into Egypt with a family of seventy souls, which returned to Canaan four hundred years later as a nation with some six hundred thousand men capable of bearing arms, besides women, children, their own old people, and many followers, about two million persons.²¹ As Jacob's descendants increased in Egypt they adopted the religion of the country, and the question has now to be asked, Was such an adoption contrary to their own idea of deity? But this necessitates the prior question, What was their religion when, as a family, a mere handful of people, they had gone down into Egypt? Hommel would have us see in Abraham a monotheist,²² who, however, was nothing more than a henotheist, since the god of Melchizedek, to whom he willingly paid tithes, was a mere Canaanite deity.²³ Jacob also was a henotheist, as can be seen from the covenant made between himself and Laban, where the deities of Abraham and Nahor are two different gods.²⁴ This is further proved by Jacob demanding that his household should put away the images and amulets of the gods which they, as former members of Laban's household, had been accustomed to worship.

¹⁹ Kautzsch, in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Religion of Israel."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, s.v. "God."

²¹ Budde, *Religion of Israel*, 4; Macgregor, *Exodus*, I, 192; *Exod.* 12:37, 38.

²² *Op. cit.*, 304.

²³ Driver, *op. cit.*, 165; Toffteen, *op. cit.*, 24.

²⁴ Driver, *op. cit.*, 259; Bennett, *op. cit.*, 308; Gen. 31:53 RV.

These Jacob simply buried beneath the sacred terebinth at Shechem, thus showing his respect for them, although they formed no part of the worship of his own special deity (Gen. 35:2-4). But Jacob's action does not show that his household had put the conception of their *own gods* out of their hearts, for their later adoption of the gods of Egypt shows that they had remained inherently true polytheists. Nor must we neglect to note that the number of persons mentioned as comprising Jacob's family which went down to Egypt could not have included all that came out with him from Padan-Aram. When we recall Abraham's three hundred servants born in his house, and then think of the enormous number of cattle Jacob must have owned (Gen. 32:13-20), we can readily understand that he too must have had a great number of servants. All this is confirmed by the statement of Joseph to Pharaoh's butler and baker, that he had been stolen out of the land of the Hebrews. Such a description of Canaan at that time shows that it must have been full of these people, most of whom were descendants of Abraham's, Isaac's, and Jacob's servants brought from Padan-Aram. These could never have been more than nominal worshipers of El Shaddai, the more or less personal deity of their respective masters (Gen. 6:3), so that it was only natural that they should have first included him among their own gods of Padan-Aram, and then have lost *both* in a later acceptance of the gods of their new Canaanite home. It was, as Joshua indicates, thus in Egypt with Jacob's own immediate descendants, and all owing to an inherent tendency to polytheism derived from their original fathers, who had themselves been polytheists (Josh. 24:2, 14, 15). Professor Kautzsch, however, would have us believe that the fathers of the Hebrew-Israelite-Egyptians whom Joshua was addressing had not "from the first their own specifically Israelitish gods, but that they abandoned themselves to the worship of the foreign gods in whose country and sphere they sojourned." But the fathers of the Babylonian Hebrews, southern Arabians, were pronounced polytheists who, in conquering the Sumerian-Babylonians, adopted their polytheism because they themselves were polytheists. Their descendants, that is, so many of them as finally went down into Egypt and there became Hebrew-Israelite-Egyptians, followed

in their footsteps by adopting the gods of Egypt. Finally, when these stood on the borders of Canaan ready to commence its conquest, notwithstanding their newly-adopted faith in Yahweh, they were ready at once to recognize in the gods of the Canaanite nation real gods,²⁵ whom they at once confused with Yahweh, putting him on a level with them.²⁶ When Jacob went down into Egypt there was, as I have already intimated, *no* Israelite nation; it was yet to be born. From its fathers, the sons of Jacob, it had evidently inherited little knowledge of, or loyalty to El Shaddai, the personal god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, with the exception possibly of Joseph, the sons of Jacob may be viewed as just as much attached to the gods their mothers had brought with them from Padan-Aram as to their father's god, El Shaddai. Before they went down to Egypt we see Judah having commerce with a supposed *kedeshah*, or sacred prostitute of a heathen shrine (Gen. 35:21). If, then, the Canaanite-Israelite held his monotheism loosely, and was ready to worship at Canaanite shrines,²⁷ so also must the sons of Jacob have held the henotheism of their father loosely, and have been equally ready to worship at the shrines of the Egyptians. Thus it was that before long their descendants in Egypt, possessing already the strange gods of their fathers, grew up to recognize the gods of the Egyptians as equally their gods. With them there was no "adoption" of these latter gods. Being already more or less polytheists, the gods of the country in which they were born were naturally the gods whom they included as such among the traditional gods of their fathers. Thus it is that Professor Sayce explains the calf-worship of the Israelites, when Moses seemed to have deserted them, as "their *own* faith in the days before the Exodus."²⁸ Some modern scholars reject the once generally accepted opinion that the Israelites borrowed the calf-worship from the Egyptians, attributing it rather to "the primitive conception of the Semitic stock to which the Hebrews belonged, the bull being a symbol of deity throughout the Semitic

²⁵ Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Idolatry."

²⁶ Bennett, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 10, 11.

²⁷ Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Israel."

²⁸ *Early History of the Hebrews*, 201.

world.²⁹ Others, however, still accept the old view.³⁰ We agree with the latter, since the Israelites, while from an original Semitic stock, had grown up in a country in which Egyptian and not Semitic ideas prevailed. Indeed, it is doubtful whether they knew anything at all about Semitic faith and ritual. Nor is there anything in the argument that the Israelites just freed from Egyptian bondage would not have adopted an Egyptian deity to worship. They had asked for *gods*, new gods like Yahweh, to whom they had only recently been introduced by Moses. In Aaron making them a *calf* they did not necessarily see in it an Egyptian god, but a deity whose mere image and style of worship they were familiar with, and that was all. As for the inference sought to be drawn from the words of Aaron that the Israelites thought they were worshiping Yahweh, this is doubtful. They wanted gods, and they had no particular choice, as the form of their request shows (Exod. 32:1-6). If Aaron chose to represent that the god he had made for them was Yahweh, they did not care so long as they could worship with their accustomed heathen rites. Thus in spirit and action they were still out-and-out idolatrous polytheists. This Yahweh himself is represented as indicating, and this was the cause of Moses demanding a reconsecration to Yahweh with the terrible slaughter of the apostates. It is now freely conceded that while through the judges and the monarchy Yahweh alone was Israel's God, "it was generally held that the gods of other nations—Chemosh, Milcom, and so on—had a real existence and authority in their respective lands."³¹ But this, unfortunately, was not all. In the time of the Judges the Israelites frequently forsook Yahweh for the Baals, the gods of the people among whom they dwelt; Solomon reared altars for Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Milcom, and others in Jerusalem itself for his heathen wives, and here he himself bowed to them; while on the very edge of the exile men, women, and children took their customary part in the worship of the queen of heaven (Judg. 2:11; I Kings 11:1-7; Jer. 7:18).

²⁹ See Hastings' *Dict. of the Bible*; *Standard Bible Dictionary*; Smith's *Bible Dictionary*; McNeile, *Exodus*.

³⁰ *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; Toffteen, *op. cit.*, 175.

³¹ McNeile, *Exodus*, 110.

In our next and concluding paper of this series we shall refer again to this polytheism of the Hebrews. Here we feel that we have said enough to show that the polytheism exhibited in Gen. 1:26 was but the reflection of that believed in by the Hebrew people as a whole at the time it was written.

NOTE.—In my claim that the Hebrews had originally been and continued to remain polytheists, I am perfectly aware of the fact that there is no definite trace of any special gods existing among the Hebrew-Israelites that had belonged to their Babylonian and Aramaic forefathers as peculiarly their own original deities. In this sense, of course, it is true that “there is no trace of a *Hebrew* polytheism.” But this is an entirely different matter from the denial that there is any trace “of a once-prevailing Israelitish polytheism.” The Arabian forefathers of the Israelites, when they conquered Babylon, because they *were* polytheists, themselves adopted the polytheism of their new home. The Aramaic-Hebrews did the same thing, and so did the Egyptian-Hebrews, and finally the Canaanite-Hebrews. These facts show plainly that the Hebrews from the first had been polytheists whose original gods they at each migration exchanged for those of the country in which they took up their abode. All this seems to us to present a very clear trace of “a once prevailing and still continuing Israelitish polytheism.” A. E. W.